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commissioning a craft object**

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Published version

HANSON, Maria (2010). Elongated Intimacy: The intimate experience of owning / commissioning a craft object. In: Transmission: HOSPITALITY, Sheffield, UK, 1-3 July 2010.

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Elongated Intimacy

Friend: The intimate experience of owning / commissioning a craft object

Maria Hanson

In the *The Cultural Biography of Objects* Gosden and Marshall write ‘people have realised that objects do not just provide a stage setting to human actions; they are integral to it’.¹ They present the idea that as people and objects gather time, movement, and change, they are constantly transformed and these transformations of person and objects are tied up with each other. The notion of transformation, like alchemy, is one that has always obsessed jewellers and metalworkers. The physical and emotional agency generated through material change as metal is worked is both powerful and profound. This intimacy of the hand-crafted object was a subject for debate at the 2007 multi-disciplinary symposium *Objects and Ritual* where the dialogue focused on the relations between artefacts and ritual acts.² The discussion was informed by established ideas in ritual theory, archaeology, and material culture, significantly the Althusserian model which suggests that ‘ritual practices are produced with intent to order, rectify or transform a particular situation’.³ If one holds that our desires, choices, intentions, preferences, judgements, and so forth are the consequences of social practices, the question for makers, consumers, curators, and historians is how objects might act as mediators, tools, commemorators, and symbols in this construct. In her paper, the cultural theorist Marjan Unger poses the question: ‘How will you (craftspeople) make things that others will value, give a place in their intimate space and include in the rituals of their daily life?’.⁴

This question was presented as a provocation with the suggestion that craft-makers engage in a self-indulgent practice, creating artefacts that have no role to play in contemporary social and material culture. While I do not think Unger herself believes this to be the case, this provocation created the motivation for me as a researcher and craft-maker to look beyond the relations between the ‘subject’ (craft-making) and ‘object’ (artefacts), which embody a set of intentions with symbolic significance and narrative agendas and engage with additional research methodologies to elicit knowledge about the life of contemporary craft objects when they are owned, used, and worn. Empirical research was conducted using in-depth semi-structured interview techniques where one of the primary objectives was to discover whether the reception of the ‘object’ was equal to the intention of the maker.⁵

There is a great deal of literature in the social sciences and material culture about consumerism, possessions, and values, but very little includes information about the way craft objects are encountered and consumed, and the values and meanings that they subsequently inherit. Defining ‘craft’ has been and still is a contentious issue and this paper does not intend to cover such ground. However, for the purposes of some definition the term relates to those artefacts produced in the professional (as opposed to amateur) field and in the context of the case studies to be presented refers to silversmithing and jewellery artefacts.

Theoretical and critical dialogue in contemporary crafts has a short history. As Pamela Johnson writes, ‘during the rise of critical theory, particularly in the 1980s within visual studies, craft makers and mediators remained outside the debate’.⁶ Since the 1990s an increasing number of publications have connected crafts to a wider cultural debate and presented thinking that goes beyond describing craft technique and maker biography.⁷ Although most of these texts have been written and edited by craft theorists/critics, the increase in practitioners as academic researchers has provided new opportunities that enable makers in the field to locate their work in this theoretical framework.⁸

Historically, decorative and functional objects made from jewels and precious metals were understood as luxury commodities, which provided visual evidence of wealth and status. Prior to the industrial revolution the artisan and craftsman was held in great esteem, creating luxury goods that were integral to the social and cultural lifestyles of those who were able to afford to own, use, and wear them. The advances of multiple manufacture initially brought new possibilities for the silverware and jewellery industries, but the development of new materials created more affordable and easier to maintain good quality functional objects. This increase of product choice resulted in the purchase of stainless steel objects over silver and thus began the decline of the silverware industry. It also brought a new phenomenon in relation to consumerism, lifestyle, and value systems, with which I believe the contemporary craft-maker is required to engage. The recent study

Consuming Craft: The Contemporary Craft Market in a Changing Economy, commissioned by the Crafts Council from the Morris Hargreaves McIntyre consultancy, has identified significant shifts in consumer demand towards value-centred products, services, and experiences which meet emotional as well as functional needs and present new opportunities for those working in this field.⁹

The unprecedented number of goods available for consumption in today's industrialised societies and the increased time spent on acquiring or working to pay for them has fuelled a collective enquiry about the meanings and values of possessions. In examining the complexity of value beyond a simplified economic market exchange Richins suggests that scholars have addressed it in three distinct ways.¹⁰ The first, evidenced by Russell Belk's 'Possessions and the Extended Self', examines the role of possessions in defining the self and creating a sense of identity.¹¹ The second emphasises the use of goods within a culture's social communication system, as shown in Douglas and Isherwood's *The World of Goods*,¹² and the third, employed by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's 'The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self', attempts to identify the particular meanings of possessions that give them value.¹³ I feel that the contemporary craft object has not been examined to any great extent in this Social Science context and therefore little data currently exists in this area. My own research engages with the meanings and values attached to the hand-crafted possession in relation to these critical frameworks and initial findings will be illustrated through the following case studies.¹⁴

Case Studies

The aim of this research was to elicit knowledge about the life of specific contemporary hand-made craft objects when they are owned and used or worn, in order to discover whether the reception of the *objects* was equal to the maker's intentions. In the three case studies presented here, data was collected using semi-structured interview methods. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was conducted either at the participants' home or their work place. The respondents were invited to participate because they had purchased, commissioned, or acquired an object created me. All participants knew me in some capacity which on reflection was advantageous and allowed conversation to unfold more naturally, often with greater disclosure of information.

The interview schedule was constructed with a number of questions under six thematic sections:

1. Factual information about person(s); how and why object was acquired.
2. Functional practical issues; how it is worn, used or stored.
3. Material and craft-making.
4. Values; material, intrinsic, monetary, and emotional.
5. The meaning of the object.
6. Craft object versus commercial product.

All participants were informed of the reasons for conducting this research and were given the opportunity to withdraw at any stage of the process. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and all names changed to protect the participant's identity. It is impossible in the context of this paper to describe in full detail all that was revealed, but I will, in the spirit of Daniel Miller, present portraits of the people and stories of the objects with which they live.¹⁵

Drinking Cups: Ordinary Extra-ordinary

In order to test my methodology and interview structure, I invited an acquaintance (someone with whom I had worked professionally in Sheffield) to participate in a pilot project, and asked if she and her husband would like to have a piece of functional silver to use for a period of time and then take part in an interview to talk about their experiences. Although I know this couple, Florence and Bob (who are in their early 30s), I would not classify them as intimate friends. They were very

excited about the idea which they termed as an ‘experiment’. They lived with and used two silver hand-raised cups for a period of six weeks.



Drinking Cups: Ordinary Extra-ordinary: Designed and made by Maria Hanson © 2009
Silver and 23ct gold.

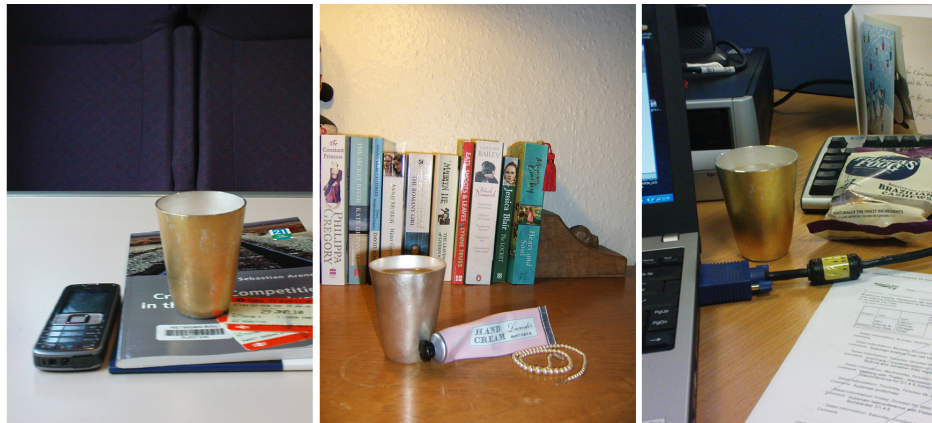
The requests I made of them were to use the cups as often as they felt able, to enjoy them and to not be concerned or overly precious because of their perceived monetary value. I had no preconceived thoughts about the life that these cups would have during this time and from the moment of handing over had no contact with the couple until I went to interview them. In the true sense of hospitality the couple invited me to share dinner with them at their home where we discussed the ‘experiment’ in great detail. I could not have been more delighted when I arrived at their house to discover the cups sitting on the draining board next to the rest of the dishes.



Drinking cups on Florence and Bob’s draining board, 2010.

Florence’s background is in archaeology and museum studies, and she works for a company which handles precious metal objects. She stated that in that context she had always worn protective cotton gloves to handle objects and had never drank out of silver until now. Bob is an engineer

and manages research projects for a large rail network. Although they have an interest in silver and have bought one or two small hand-crafted objects they feel that at the moment they need to prioritise other things on which to spend any surplus funds that they may have. As the interview gathered pace, helped possibly by the drinking of wine (with Florence and Bob using the silver cups), it became very clear that these objects had become the focus of both private and public social communication. Florence and Bob had used these cups on a daily basis and discussed the circumstances, events, and places in which these interactions took place. Photography has always been important to them as a means of recording places and experiences, and it seemed natural that this was a new subject for that obsession (I am delighted they are happy for me to use some of those images in this context).



Ordinary Extra-ordinary: The early stages of the experiment.

They talked about their nervousness in the first few days, being somewhat in awe of the objects themselves, the surprising weight and obvious monetary value. It was Bob who got past the ‘honeymoon period’ quickest and decided it was time to take the cups on an adventure. One regularly went with him in his pocket on the train to work and also enjoyed a short trip to Stockholm.



Bob's cup goes to Stockholm!

Most of this was without Florence's knowledge, and when discovered she was initially horrified, feeling that this was no way to treat a silver object. Then she felt she was missing out on the adventure, and the two cups began to go other places together, including a camping trip to the Scottish Borders.



The cups go out together at last.



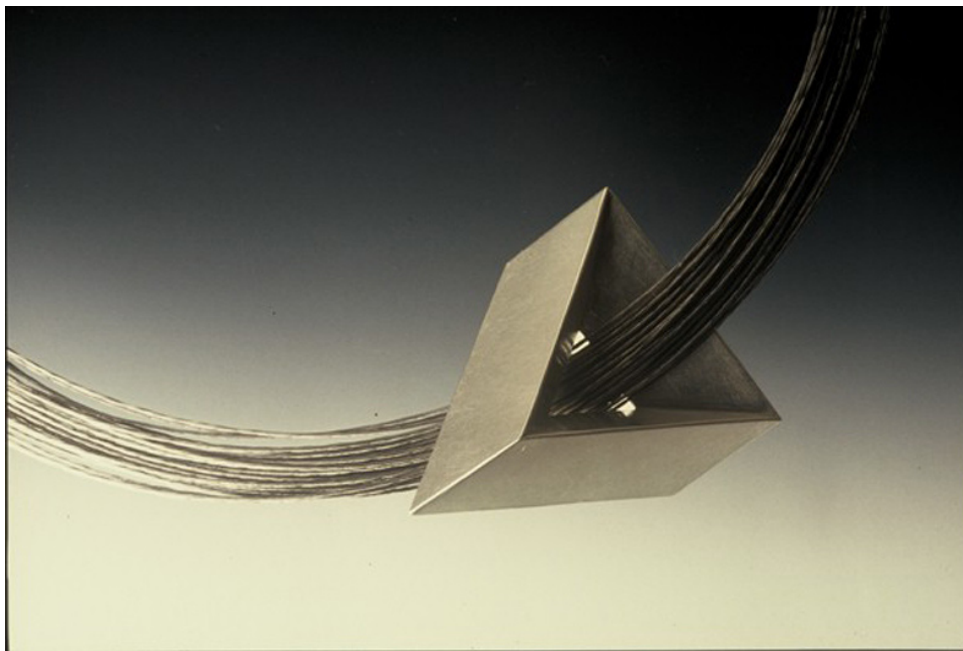
Silver cups camping in Northumberland

The cups were responsible for many discussions with family and friends about possessions, materials, and values; however, not everybody who came into contact with the couple or the cups

really understood why such things were important or relevant. They provided a vehicle to reflect on other possessions and on the intimate relationship that the couple share. At the time of interviewing I was struck by the sense that these cups no longer belonged to me, the 'maker'; they were being referred to as 'my cup' or 'Bob's cup'. The external surface of one is covered in gold foil and Bob had been naturally drawn to this particular piece (though Florence admitted to secretly using Bob's when he was not around). An idea presented by Gosden and Marshall is that as people and objects gather time and movement, they are constantly transformed and these transformations of persons and objects are tied up with each other.¹⁶ This is certainly true of these cups. As a consequence of what had been revealed over dinner I thanked my hosts for their incredible hospitality and left without the cups. Since that time the couple have bought the pieces and I hope that their relation with them continues to be enjoyable.

Triangle Neckpiece

The Triangle Neckpiece was originally designed and made during my MA course some twenty years ago. It was an edition of ten with the original being sold to a woman (then in her 50s) at the opening of the 1991 MA exhibition at the Royal College of Art. This woman, Mary, is herself a contemporary jeweller and at the time of purchasing the piece her husband was the professor of the course from which I was graduating.



Triangle Neckpiece: Designed and made by Maria Hanson © 1991, Silver and stainless steel

It was only through interviewing her that I discovered that for a period of about twenty-five years she had been acquiring contemporary jewellery for her private collection. It was therefore impossible to discuss this piece in isolation as it was so inextricably linked to her ideas about the whole collection. In fact, it was more interesting to discover with what other objects this neckpiece was cohabiting. For Mary, the overriding motivation to acquire something related to how the idea and material were bound together. As she states, 'everything that I acquire (collection or not), is because it has spoken to me'. Her collection is made up of three distinct sections: works that have been bought (primarily from recent graduates and visiting artists); works that have been acquired through exchange; and some works that have been given as gifts. This last group does not have the same resonance as the others because they were not chosen. Mary discussed how she is naturally inquisitive, she likes things, collections, and museums. Being born in 1939 at the outbreak of war meant she had very few toys and the box of buttons with which she played and carried around is

cited as significant in moulding her personal values on possessions. When asked about storing and looking after the collection Mary says:

I have been very badly behaved with the objects, not really looking after them; some pieces are in the cabinet, some in boxes, some hanging on the wall. I don't really have time to do it. I've really just acquired them.

She has not worn the collection a lot, though the Triangle Neckpiece has been rewarded with this pleasure on a number of occasions, including the opening of the graduate exhibition at the Royal College of Art following the year of its purchase. This was seen partly as an ambassadorial activity but also one of enjoyment. Mary feels that contemporary jewellery is accessible but one has to wear it for the right occasions, in places where it will be appreciated. There are many pieces which have never been worn or even tried on; the motivation to acquire them was not connected to how the pieces looked on the body. She has on occasion tried things on and then realised how dreadful they looked.

In discussing values Mary cites the Triangle Neckpiece as marking a moment (a point which was raised by a number of people interviewed), and that is how it sits in the context of the collection. It slots into its time; just after the end of the belief by some that the only things worth making should be made with so-called 'alternative materials'. The monetary value of objects in the collection is not important to her but money (or lack of it) has occasionally been a problem. There are some works that she was not able to acquire for the collection because they were too expensive, and then when she was able to afford them they were no longer available.

Her fascination with collecting has now stopped. The collection is closed except when she accidentally buys something at an exhibition opening, forgetting that she has made a decision not to add to the hoard. Now in her 70s she is more preoccupied with what is going to happen to this archive. She is adamant that it cannot and should not be split up. She is not attached to the 'things' individually, but there is a huge attachment to the idea of them together. She has begun to catalogue her collection, which includes all letters and notes connected to individual items, but she knows it needs archiving properly and there is a sense that this obsession has become something of a burden.

Wedding Rings

Rachel and Mark's decision to get married was connected to an incredibly traumatic experience in 1992. In the interview Rachel says:

I never ever wanted to be married. In a way I still don't want to be married. It's just something that has never appealed to me, I've never, it's never a state I've thought 'Oh wouldn't it be lovely when I'm married'. And somehow when Freddy was born it was so horrible, interestingly the overriding thought I had, and I can recall thinking it in that hospital room, I remember it entirely actually, thinking this is horrible, this is a horrible nightmare situation and I do not want it to be horrible and nightmarish, we will get married and it will make it all OK. Which obviously rather subverts my statement of 'I never want to be married'. So having not decided but having emotionally felt the need to be married at that stage I did want something very particular, to commemorate that event. Which is my ring and Mark's ring; even though he won't wear his.

Freddy was born with a rare incurable chromosomal defect. Doctors could not be certain how long he would live; at worst it would be days, at best a few weeks. The decision to get married was a way for this couple to deal with the unthinkable situation they found themselves in after the birth of their first child. Rachel does not link the physicality of the ring to her son's death; it was commissioned before he died so the memory of that stage is with him there. It is like a worry bead for her, and sometimes when she fiddles with it and looks at it she does recall and is transported back to that moment eighteen years ago. Although it is probably an assumption, she believes that her ring is

more important and meaningful than other people's, which is just a symbol of the day.

The rings are made of two coloured golds; a central band of white is encircled by two bands of yellow. There are obvious symbolic associations if one is aware of the circumstances, though Rachel also says that it reminds her of a liquorice allsort. She has always worked in arts administration and so it was important to her to commission a hand-made ring rather than going to a shop and purchasing a mass-produced object. The intensity of the personal circumstances meant that she did not get as involved in the design process as she could, though (from my memory) it was quite clear the kind of aesthetic characteristics that these objects should have. What was important to the couple was that they could feel at ease with the craftsperson coming into their house at this time and confident that the maker was going to deliver. They needed to feel confident that the product would meet their standards and be delivered on time. Rachel never takes the ring off and has never cleaned it. She seemed worried that I asked this question and wondered if she should. Of course the constant wearing gives the ring a warm quality and in my opinion, the marks of time enhance its appearance. She did need to remove it recently to have it enlarged slightly and felt quite bereft for the few hours that she was without it. She recently acquired a second ring with a diamond; her grandmother's engagement ring, which she wears on the same finger. This has changed things somewhat.



Wedding Ring: designed and made by Maria Hanson © 1992, 18ct Gold

We had an interesting discussion about values and emotions in relations to these two rings. Both hold great significance for different reasons. Although the wedding ring does have a monetary value in terms of material, this is of little relevance to the couple; however, the diamond ring is considerably more significant in these terms and the possession of it feels like a burden, especially as there is a responsibility to hand this heirloom down to a niece. Rachel is not a hoarder, and says that having two teenage boys has made her quite ruthless about throwing junk away. However she does own a number of hand-made objects including the ring and with consideration articulates that although very varied in material form and function they all belong to the activity of story-telling, both in an object and subject sense.

NOTES

1. Chris Gosden & Yvonne Marshall, 'The Cultural Biography of Objects', *World Archaeology*; vol. 31, no. 2, 1999, pp. 169 178.
2. Maria Hanson, *Objects + Ritual: Function – Value – Adornment*, Harley Gallery: UK [on DVD].
3. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory; Ritual Practice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 108.
4. Maria Hanson, *Objects + Ritual: Function – Value – Adornment*, Harley Gallery: UK [on DVD].
5. The semi-structured interview technique is used in social science research in the collection of qualitative data where the interviewer to be merely guided by a schedule of structured questions. Once a rapport has been established this methodology enables the probing of areas of interest in a flexible way allowing rich descriptions to be elicited.
6. Pamela Johnson, *Ideas in the Making: Practice in Theory*, London: Crafts Council, 1998, p. 15.
7. See, for example, *The Culture of Craft*, ed. by Peter Dormer, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997; Glenn Adamson, *Thinking through Craft*, London: Berg, 2007; Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*, London: Allen Lane, 2008.
8. See, for example, *Keypiece* <<http://www3.shu.ac.uk/keypiece/>> [accessed May 2010]; *Intelligent-Trouble: A Curious Exchange* <<http://www.caa.org.uk/exhibitions/archive/intelligent-trouble.html>> [accessed May 2010]; *Taking Time: Craft and the Slow Revolution* <<http://www.craftspace.co.uk>> [accessed May 2010].
9. Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, *Consuming Craft: The Contemporary Craft Market in a Changing Economy*, London: Crafts Council, 2010.
10. Marsha Richens, 'Valuing Things: The Public and Private Meanings of Possessions', *The Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1994, pp. 504 521.
11. Russell W. Belk, 'Possessions and the Extended Self', *The Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1988, pp. 139 168.
12. Douglas & Isherwood, *The World of Goods*, New York: Basic, 1979.
13. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1981.
14. A great many ideas proposed by social science theorists such as Durkheim, Belk, Miller, Bell, Richins, Csikszentmihalyi, and Rochberg-Halton have informed the way this research is being undertaken.
15. Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008.
16. Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, 'The Cultural Biography of Objects', 1999.